

## The Soviet Problem, Old Poets, and the End of Mata Hari July 23

At the end of World War II, Josef Stalin presided over a shattered landscape. In reversing the Nazi's brutal occupation of nine of its fifteen republics, the Soviet Union recorded 25 million dead. The city of Leningrad alone lost one million.

Stalin leveraged the dead with Allied leaders Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt to engorge the USSR's postwar borders. Stalin's chief regret, as he remarked at the Yalta Conference in early 1945, was that he would not reach Paris as his predecessor Tsar Alexander had against Napoleon. But, as Stalin jubilantly celebrated Victory Day atop Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow on May 9, his Red Army had cordoned off a landmass second only to the Mongol chieftain Genghis Khan, 700 years before.

A "Cold War" had begun. Now, Stalin's own murderous political methods of seizing power were spilling over into bloody Kremlin-backed takeovers of war-weary East European and Balkan regimes. This alarmed the other Allied leaders, whose anxiety was further heightened by knowledge of heavily-encrypted Soviet commercial and diplomatic cables. Churchill's once casual aside that, shielded from outside scrutiny, Stalin's USSR would remain "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." To Allied intelligence, discovering Stalin's ambitions by drawing back the folds of his Cold War "iron curtain" took on urgency as "the Soviet Problem."

The United States and Great Britain had cooperated in signals intelligence against the Axis Powers during World War II. This prior cooperation and postwar need culminated in a partnership formalized in 1946 as "*BRUSA --- The British-United states Communication Intelligence Agreement*," a seven-page top secret agreement. The new document would again coordinate Allied assets against threats posed by, among others, the USSR. NOTE: the British used the term "signals intelligence," while the Americans then still called it "communications intelligence."

BRUSA reversed American's vanishing postwar cryptologic resources. In *The Secret Sentry: the Untold Story of the NSA* (2009), Mathew Aid reported that the U.S. administration demobilized 80 percent of U.S. COMINT personnel following Japan's surrender in August 1945. The new agreement combined the scarce remaining assets to follow the USSR.

Stephen Budiansky's *Code Warriors* (2016) reports how signals intelligence became a last, best remedy for Soviet secrecy. HUMINT had failed. Hundreds of American and British HUMINT penetrations of the Soviet Union, in programs begun just as the Soviets detonated their first atomic bomb in 1949, were instantly compromised. Whether agents were inserted into the Baltics by boat, parachuted into Ukraine and Lithuania, or infiltrated in Albania, all were captured, tortured, or shot, with just a few preserved for show trials. In the 1950s, an American intelligence study summed the Soviets up as "brutally effective in limiting the infiltration, exfiltration, and usefulness of agents" in any "classic covert operation." As an aide to President Eisenhower lamented, "The time of Mata Hari has passed." Overhead reconnaissance was just a dream, so the HUMINT failures gave COMINT operations renewed impetus.

The BRUSA signatories adopted the covername "BOURBON" for the joint cryptanalytic enterprise attacking several Soviet cipher systems. A cipher machine system, LONGFELLOW, came under study in July 1946, when a copy of the machine --- according to Mathew Aid --- had been constructed by U.S. Navy cryptanalysts, based on specifications from a British solution to the system.\* Approval was given in late 1947 for a processing machine codenamed HIAWATHA that would have allowed continuous reading of LONGFELLOW. The approval was grudging because of the \$1 million price tag and a requirement for an estimated 40,000 vacuum tubes.

HIAWATHA was never built. The Soviets learned about BRUSA successes against LONGFELLOW, and scuttled the system in April 1948.

The Soviet Problem worsened exponentially in Fall 1948. Known as "Black Friday" within the BRUSA community, it began on the weekend of October 30. By Monday, November 1, all Soviet military, naval, and police radio communications

had reverted to worthless messages showing only that the network was linked and operating. Months later, new, heavily encrypted traffic with unfamiliar ciphers began to appear. Because of security concerns, Stalin had apparently finished off the Old Poets as well. Some thought the Biblical end of days had indeed arrived.

\* There were several types of names given to Soviet systems, including one named after “Old Poets;” these were regularized in the 1950s to designations similar to those used today.